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## EXTATIC INTOXICATION IN RELIGION\*

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In the religions of nearly all savage and semi-civilized peoples, extatic intoxication is regarded as communion or union with the divine; and even in the higher religions, similar conditions enjoy the same consideration. Why should intoxication and extasy be assigned the supreme place in religion?

Religious intoxication is not always produced by drugs. It may arise from physical excitement, from dancing, for instance; or it may be generated by psychic means; those used by the Christian mystics. Although in this brief paper I shall be able to do little more than indicate the connection that exists between drug intoxication and the higher mysticism, I hope to show that despite the diversity of their origin they are closely related to one another by certain psychological characteristics, by the purpose they serve, and by the significance usually ascribed to them. I shall take up successively the several classes of means used to produce intoxication in religious ceremonies, the usual explanation of the exalted character ascribed to these states, and the deeper, more fundamental reason for this fact.

I had probably better say at the outset that I have no intention of reducing mysticism to drunkenness. For the best of the Christian mystics I have a real admiration; they are noble men who, on the whole, have deserved well of humanity. It seems to me childish, however, to pretend to dispose of the subject, as religious writers are wont to do, with vague high-sounding words such as ineffable, infinite, unutterable, absolute, divine. That is not the way to make intelligible the nature and the function of mysticism; it merely encourages a romantic megalomania already too conspicuous among religious believers.

Chemical means, i. e., drugs, are employed almost exclusively by uncivilized peoples in order to produce intoxication during religious ceremonies. Brinton tells us that "in every savage tribe we find a knowledge of narcotic plants which were employed to induce strange and vivid hallucinations or dreams . . . . The negroes of the Niger had their 'fetish

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water', the Creek Indians of Florida their 'black drink' for this purpose. In many parts of the United States the natives smoked stramonium, the Mexican tribes swallowed the *peyotl* and the snake-plant, the tribes of California and the Samoyeds of Siberia had found a poisonous toadstool; all to bring about communication with the Divine and to induce extatic visions."<sup>1</sup> The Indians of New Mexico who are "unacquainted with intoxicating liquors . . . find drunkenness, in the fumes of a certain herb smoked through a stone tube and used chiefly during their religious festivals." Among the old Mexicans, a seed called *Oliliuhque* entered into a vision-producing "divine medicine," which could be obtained only from the priests.<sup>2</sup>

"In the Indic and Iranian cult there was," we are told, "a direct worship of deified liquor analogous to Dionysiac rites." It has even been maintained that the whole Rig Veda is but a collection of hymns for soma worship. The drinking ceremony was accompanied by magical incantations and by religious invocations. During the frequent libations that marked the sacrifice of soma, the officiating priest asked repeatedly for inspiration. He offered the liquor with these words: "O, Indra, accept our offering . . . drink of the soma, thou the friend of prayer and of the liquor; well disposed God, drink in order to intoxicate thyself." "I pour it out into the double cavity of thy belly; may it spread through thy members; may it be sweet to thy taste; may it steal upon thee, O deliverer, veiled as women seeking a *rendez-vous*. Hero with the strong neck, full bellied, strong of arms, O Indra, praised by many, accept the pressed out soma, father of divine energy."<sup>3</sup>

Modern India has not renounced the use of drugs in religious ceremonies. The India Hemp Commission appointed by the English Government to investigate the use of hemp drugs in its Hindoo possessions, reported that several hemp preparations are "extensively used in the exercise of religious practices." They found evidence of the "almost universal use of hemp drugs by fakirs, jogis, sanyasis, and ascetics of all classes, and more particularly by those devoted to the worship of Siva."<sup>4</sup> The hemp plant is believed by priests and people to be a special attribute of that god.

<sup>1</sup> David Brinton, *The Religions of Primitive Peoples*, pp. 67.

<sup>2</sup> H. H. Bancroft, *Native Races*, vol. I, pp. 566-567.

<sup>3</sup> Galand and Henry, *L'Agnistonia*, vol. I, pp. 162, 155, 249; vol. II, p. 311.

<sup>4</sup> *Report of the India Hemp Commission, 1893-94*, Vol. I, pp. 160, 161, 165.

Wine drunkenness was conspicuous in the worship of Dionysos. To the effect of the wine was added that of dancing, music, shouting, and expectation of divine extasy.<sup>5</sup>

But drugs are not the only means of securing the blessed intoxication in which people of every degree of culture find delight. Rhythmic bodily movements, sufficiently violent and long continued, yield results similar in several respects to those of alcohol, stramonium, cohoba, and other drugs. There are in Grosse's *The Beginnings of Art*, interesting descriptions of Australian dances ending in a condition of extatic trance.<sup>6</sup>

As soon as a somewhat spiritual conception of divinity arose, drugs and mechanical means could no longer be regarded as proper means of approaching it. These grossly material methods appeared incongruous with the god-ideas that were taking shape. Furthermore, the disagreeable after-effects of these practices were not easily reconcilable with the theory of god-possession. Yet intoxication was too delightful and gratified too many deep needs to be given up. Thus arose the problem of finding a method of intoxication consistent with the higher conception of the divine nature. This problem was solved by the discovery of psychic methods, which, associated with drugs, appear already in Dionysiac and in Soma worship. In the Yoga practices, physical and psychical means are equally employed. In Christian mysticism, only the latter are acknowledged, although physical influences have not ceased to lend their aid. Even at the present day, physical means are not altogether excluded; in so-called "revival meetings," for instance, the monotonous repetition of rhythmical songs, accentuated by shouts and bodily movements, help to produce a condition similar to that in which the dervish attains partial anaesthesia and visions of Allah.

Why this extraordinary association of extatic intoxication with the gods? The common and well-known explanation is that intoxication in bringing visions and, with them, alleged superhuman powers of healing, of making rain, of destroying enemies, of forecasting the future, of controlling spirits, etc., raises man to the level of the gods.

Revelations and specific powers account perhaps sufficiently for the connection established in the unenlightened mind between intoxication and a higher world; but these characteristics do not fully explain its irresistible attraction. There are other

<sup>5</sup> See the description in Erwin Rohde's *Psyche, Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube*, 4th ed., Tübingen, 1907, vol. II, pp. 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> See chap. III.

and more fundamental reasons than those for the supreme place granted in religion to intoxication and extasy. The allurements of intoxication arises not so much from the belief that it affords esoteric knowledge and a share in the power of the Invisibles, as from the gratification it provides for certain deep needs and cravings. The truth of this statement is borne out by the fact that when intoxication ceases to be regarded as union with God and as a source of superhuman power, it continues to inspire the pen of the poet and to entice the unwary often beyond his power of resistance.

Some of these more fundamental values are indicated in the quotations I have given from religious customs of various peoples. They will appear more clearly and completely in instances of intoxication disconnected from any relation with religion. I quote one of the classical descriptions of the wonders worked by alcohol, "I send you," writes Colonel Ingersoll, "some of the most wonderful whiskey that ever drove the skeleton from the feast or painted landscapes in the brain of man. It is the mingled souls of wheat and corn. In it you will find the sunshine and the shadow that chased each other over the billowy fields; the breath of June, the carol of the lark, the dew of night, the wealth of summer and autumn's rich content, all golden with imprisoned light. Drink it, and you will hear the voices of men and maidens singing the 'Harvest Home' mingled with the laughter of children. Drink it, and you will feel within your blood the star-led dawns, the dreamy, tawney dusks of many perfect days. For forty years this liquid joy has been within the happy staves of oak longing to touch the lips of men." If all this and nothing worse was alcohol's gift to man, it would be in truth a "divine" beverage.

The information that has resulted from careful observation of the effect of narcotic drugs is still far from complete. We know, however, that their action may vary from person to person, and even in the same person under different circumstances, I shall mention only the more usual and constant effects to which these drugs owe their place in religion as well as outside of it. The drug devotees disregard all except those particular effects which are to them desirable; my purpose authorizes me to do likewise.

The effect of mescal (*anhalonium lewinii*), the very remarkable drug used in the religious festivals of Mexican and American Indians, has been studied by Dr. Weir Mitchell, Havelock Ellis, and others. The most noteworthy of its effects are marvellously beautiful color-hallucinations. Of these

the first investigator named wrote, "The display which for an enchanted two hours followed, was such as I find it hopeless to describe in language which shall convey to others the beauty and splendor of what I saw."<sup>7</sup>

Although there is a certain insensitiveness to fatigue, motor weakness and disinclination to activity is experienced. Ellis who notes this fact, remarks that this only throws "the subject of mescal intoxication more absolutely at the mercy of the waves of unfamiliar sensory impetus which strike him from every side. Every sense is affected . . . the simplest food seems to possess an added relish . . . and to the sense of touch, the body seems as unfamiliar as everything else has become." "The 'trailing clouds of glory,' the tendency to invest the very simplest things with an atmosphere of beauty, a 'light that never was on sea or land,' the new vision of even 'the simplest flower that blows,' all the special traits of Wordsworth's poetic vision correspond as exactly as possible to the actual and effortless experience of the subject of mescal."<sup>8</sup>

A uniform physiological effect of the drugs with which we are concerned is a reduction of the efficiency of the higher nervous system. They produce a partial break down of the interrelations by which the higher nervous centres exercise their control over the lower. The hilarious mood into which *cannabis indica*, ether, alcohol, and other drugs plunge their devotees, is due probably in part to this physiological action. In the description of his experiments with *cannabis indica* and ether, Dunbar wrote, "Time seemed to have no existence. I was continually taking out my watch thinking that hours must have passed, whereas only a few minutes had elapsed. This, I believe, was due to a complete loss of memory for recent events." Amnesia accounts, in part at least, for the freedom from all care and worry noted by this experimenter as well as by every other.

The beginning of the action of hasheesh is described thus by Dr. V. Robinson,<sup>9</sup> "The flood of laughter was loose, the deluge of mirth poured forth." One of the persons with whom he was experimenting exclaimed, "Cast aside all irrelevant hypotheses, and get to the laughing. I proclaim the supremacy of the laugh, laughter inextinguishable, laughter eternal, the divine laughter of the gods."

<sup>7</sup> *The effect of Anhalonium Lewinii*, Brit. Med. Jr., vol. II, 1896, pp. 1625-1628.

<sup>8</sup> *Popular Science Monthly*, vol. LXI, 1902, pp. 52-71.

<sup>9</sup> *An Essay on Hasheesh*, Med. Rev. of Reviews, New York, 1912.

The more important psychological consequence of the reduced efficiency of the higher nervous centres is the partial or total removal of the checks imposed upon us by society and logic. This means a turning away from the insistent purposes of life, a relief from daily tasks and besetting unpleasant memories. The "primary" self enjoys a period of rest from the war waged against it by the social self. Thus, there comes recovery from the insufferable staleness to which we are sometimes brought by the unrelenting demands of civilized life. Great and many are the evils into which people are enticed simply through the dullness of their existence. Tormented by the yearning for something to stir up the sluggish organism and restore a keen sense of life, man is often induced to seek excitement in drugs and in other forms of stimulation.

The need for relaxation by excitation is so universal that means of gratification have everywhere, and at all times, been sanctioned by society. Sacred and secular festivals, to which various purposes may be assigned, but which serve primarily to refresh through relaxation, form a part of the order of every society. When the faculty of Paris threatened to abolish the Feast of Fools, a petition was presented with the following argument, "Wine casks would burst if we failed sometimes to remove the bung and let in air. Now we are all ill-bound casks and barrels which would let out the wine of wisdom if by constant devotion and the fear of God we allowed it to ferment . . . Thus on some days we give ourselves up to sport, so that with the greater zeal we may afterwards return to the worship of God." When one means of refreshing the organism becomes impossible another is substituted.

The removal of social checks and of logical constraint manifests itself in a delightful sense of freedom and of power. In intoxication the galling limitations of our ordinary selves seem gone. One of Robinson's subjects exclaimed, throwing off his blanket, "Throw off the bonds of all existence." To feel that impediments vanish before the fiat of one's will, that one is equal to every demand and can soar above all obstructions, is an entrancing experience indeed. What matters it, if, as in ordinary dream, this conviction be unfounded? The delight remains a real part of the experience.

The weakening of critical ability leads, in addition, to the liberation of the fancy. In intoxication one enjoys all the pleasures of untrammelled imagination. Its quality, judged objectively, may not be high, but the subject thinks otherwise and is proudly happy.

Perhaps the most insidious of the allurements of ecstatic intoxication is an intensification of the indescribable sensational and affective background of consciousness. If normally the vital organs are only faintly represented in consciousness, they provide nevertheless an essential part of the background of consciousness. The significance of these obscure feelings is well known to the student of mental disorders; their disappearance or alteration may cause profound mental perturbation and may lead to strange hallucinations. The first stages of intoxication instead of removing, apparently intensify both the sensational and the pleasurable aspects of this somatic background. When the brakes and the fly wheels which control the primary self are removed, it seems as if vital organs reawakened to sentiency, and their multitudinous voices are lifted in a paeon of life. Nothing but sexual erethism compares with the delights of this awakening of certain ordinarily silent parts of the organism.

Philosophic poets may interpret this experience as an upward surge of the Breath of Life, the *Elan Vital*, freed from the opposition of that Other, the alien Reason. It may please them to think that "through the intermediacy of organic life, we correspond, if confusedly, with the universe." Or, they may turn to the speculations of Frederick Meyers, and see in it a transient reinvasion of the focus of consciousness by vital parts of the organism which, in the far distant past, were the chief source of sentiency. Be that as it may, we shall, I trust, agree that the primary and essential value of the intoxication consciousness to the performer of religious rites, lies not in any alleged superhuman knowledge and power, but in other very substantial results. Intoxication and extatic states possess in themselves,—i. e., independently of an interpretative connection with the divine—a delightful, sensuous, rapturous quality; they bring deliverance from the fatigues, the restraints and tensions of the daily struggle, and they create a sense of unlimited possibility and exhaustless energy. In these effects, characteristic alike of the extasy of the Christian mystic and of the drug intoxication of the lowest savage, is to be found the deeper significance of the notion that in extasy man communes with the gods.